



Guarded Memories

Kim Flora hides her skill at Manifest Gallery

MATT MORRIS // OCT 17, 2007

Kim Flora's new collaged paintings, which appear in the exhibition *Souvenir* at Manifest Gallery, profess to be the artist's own set of reflections on European travel and on a developed sensitivity to location. The best of the work offers tiny glimpses of memory and color filed onto the surface of boxy panels. The worst of it keeps the viewer at such a distance that it becomes as inaccessible as a friend's pile of photos, forced upon you as she gushes over a treasured trip's memories.

All of the paintings are oil, wax and collaged imagery on square panels of different sizes. Flora based her compositions variably on loose grids or maps that she laid down early in the painting process. Those that are based on maps (which include two of the largest pieces) are obviously about travel and location, but they don't communicate any specific impressions the way some of her alternative solutions do.

Some of the paintings have pages depicting seashells arranged in a kind of grid layered beneath wax and paint. The combination of materials is used smartly here: pale paint traces the spaces among the shells, making the viewer aware of invented paths between the exotic structures. The paint and the images become an invented map that speaks of one's navigation.

Aside from maps, there are Audubon-type birds and scraps of constellations arranged in patches underneath the wax.

Actually, nearly everything that happens in these paintings happens underneath a sticky, thick sheet of wax. Like bees protecting their honey or Egyptians burying their dead within encaustic painted shrouds, the stories that these paintings could tell are sunk deep into an overall coating. Perhaps the subject matter was still too precious to really share?

Flora has a reputation for raw deconstruction and unapologetic risk as she digs deep into the character of a painting. Sometimes her work aches from the combination of pure, juicy materials and sentimental remembrance. By comparison, these new works seem imbalanced and safe to the point of decorative. Bars of foggy color borrowed from Rothko or de Kooning mostly serve as framing devices for predictable images composed from collaged scraps.

One painting, however, defies any such criticism. "Paris in my Twenties" is one of the smallest paintings, but it packs the most surprising punch in the whole exhibition. A teetering stack of torn black-and-white photographs of cities and a chilly bar of pale water-blue occupy the bottom half of the panel, dissolving into a pale, grey-yellow. Like a cunning piece of baggage (all meanings implied), Flora's favorite formal elements are neatly organized into a fragile spatial experience. Land, sea and sky are created out of scraps of paper, swaths of oil paint and puddles of wax. Here the bars of color and fields of non-color physically represent something partially remembered. If it is a souvenir, it exists only in the artist's mind, memory blocks included.

The rest of the show is not wholly without mysterious elements. While most of the colors utilized recall the calm color schemes of Martha Stewart (not altogether a bad thing), Flora has added a muddy, grungy area that is, frankly, refreshing. "Collage for the Wilderness" is built out of these unexpected patches. While still possessing the serenity that the artist obviously intended to permeate the entire series, it is reinvented here, showing off Flora's version of calm in lieu of the crutch of a popular aesthetic. Infusions of idiosyncrasy offer redemption where they can be found in this body of paintings.

SOUVENIR is on view at Manifest Gallery through Oct. 26.

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